

Inner-city residents buoyed as Toronto crime drops

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TORONTO — The changes are subtle, but Debora McIntosh, a 56-year-old grandmother raising four boys in the inner-city public-housing labyrinth called Alexandra Park Cooperative, perceives a flicker of hope.

When she opens her front door in the morning, she often sees a policeman on a bicycle. When a marked cruiser pulls up in the grimy courtyard, no longer do all the loitering teenagers scatter: Some stick around to talk to the cops.

And most heartening, for the first time in the 15 years she's lived in this densely packed, notoriously high-crime sprawl just north of Queen Street and west of Spadina Avenue, Ms. McIntosh has heard no gunshots so far this summer.

Citywide, crime statistics seem to underscore her cautious optimism: From murder to assault and sexual assault, from car theft to break-ins, nearly every serious-crime indicator has dropped in Toronto this year compared with the same six months in 2007.

And police say the numbers are partly a reflection of TAVIS, the two-pronged Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy launched 2 1/2 years ago and central to Police Chief Bill Blair's bid to reduce violent crime.

"I feel like it's starting to change," Ms. McIntosh says of the violence that can reduce public-housing residents to prisoners in their homes. "But it's going to take a long time."

Crime is an unequal predator, inflicting more damage on some neighbourhoods than others, and the stepped-up police presence in Alexandra Park, on the eastern edge of 14 Division, is no accident.

Praised for expediting thousands of arrests and hundreds of gun seizures and decried by critics as heavy handed, TAVIS was spawned by the record gun violence that drenched Toronto in 2005 and culminated in the Boxing Day shooting of teen innocent Jane Creba.

Blending "soft" and "hard" policing in a hybrid model that has drawn interest from several foreign police agencies, TAVIS casts a wide net. And now, it seems, the net has widened further, targeting not just people with a violent track record but also street drug dealers.

The friendly part of TAVIS entails blanketing high-crime districts, usually in the evening, with teams of meet-and-greet uniformed officers who walk around talking to residents and business owners, handing out "contact cards" with useful phone numbers.

The second TAVIS component, however, evinces a much harder edge, deploying what are termed "rapid response" units that spend their time knocking on doors, checking that people free on bail — there are currently about 19,000 in Toronto — are obeying court orders.

Many of those being checked were arrested in anti-gang sweeps for violence-related offences and, for the most part, they do obey the rules, says Staff Sergeant Anil Anand, who heads the four rapid-response teams that will grow to six with a further \$5-million injection of provincial funds announced

last week.

As of June 7, there had been close to 1,800 such checks so far this year and the non-compliance rate in the past two years has dropped from 10 per cent to about 3 per cent, Staff Sgt. Anand says.

House arrest and curfews are the most common bail conditions; others include abstaining from drugs and alcohol, steering clear of known gang members and proscribed areas such as parks, and reporting to police. Any violation usually means a return trip to a police cell and a fresh court hearing.

Now, however, a new element has expanded the mix.

Last week, police unveiled a five-week, buy-and-bust undercover operation downtown that led to the arrest of about 150 individuals, jointly charged with 428 non-violent offences that chiefly involved possessing and selling small amounts of crack cocaine.

This summer, TAVIS will be keeping an eye on those people, police announced, even though low-level drug dealing seems outside the unit's mandate. Further complicating matters, only about half the accused could supply a home address.

But Detective Sergeant Howie Page of 51 Division, who oversaw many of the arrests, notes that before this latest sweep the apprehended individuals had jointly accumulated a remarkable 2,276 criminal charges. He offers no apologies.

“When people are trying to use the parks, trying to play with their kids, trying to play tennis and along the side of the fence there's drug dealing or drug using – that's what the community sees and that's why we attacked the street level,” he said.

Targeted policing doesn't mean zero tolerance.

Forget the “broken-window” school of law enforcement seen in New York under former mayor Rudy Giuliani, whereby police lay as many criminal charges as possible, including minor ones, says Staff Sgt. Anand, who has just completed his master's degree in community policing.

“There's also this thing called discretion, and zero tolerance takes all that away, so TAVIS has to be multidimensional. Just going and arresting people and taking them away – you're not doing anything, you're going to be seen as an outsider.”

Nonetheless, he agrees that drug dealing is the backdrop for a major swath of violent crime.

“Robberies, shootings – it's all tied to drugs, you wouldn't have a lot of gangs if it wasn't for drugs.”

Homicide squad leader Staff Inspector Brian Raybould says that, in concert with other police initiatives, TAVIS's bridge-building component has fostered a shift in people's willingness to aid investigations. He cites a recent murder trial that saw two gang members step forward to testify against a peer, something almost unthinkable a couple of years ago.

Not everyone, however, is cheering on TAVIS. Some view it as a vehicle for harassment.

A Toronto-made rap video on YouTube, featuring individuals police say belong to a local Bloods chapter and entitled *T.A.V. (I Wanna Make It)*, delivers this chorus:

In my 'hood they got T-A-V

And they watchin' us like we on TV.

I'm kinda bummin' yo, they on to me.

In the night these dreams are hauntin' me.

Defence lawyer Selwyn Pieters calls TAVIS a stick wielded too hard, too often.

“My experience with TAVIS, unfortunately, is that the officers are very aggressive and that the areas targeted are areas in which people are likely to be racially profiled,” he said. “I’ve received a lot of complaints about TAVIS officers using excessive force.”

Retired construction worker Jose Dias, another long-term Alexandra Park resident, sees things differently.

Mr. Dias, 64, used to have to step around the dealers to get in and out of his \$650-a-month, three-bedroom unit. Now he can leave his front door wide open on hot summer days. “I’m happy because I don’t see all the drug dealers any more,” he said.

Bail compliance should be seen as an invaluable tool in the justice system, says defence lawyer and veteran community activist Courtney Betty.

“I can absolutely see the benefits of making people comply with their bail conditions, and I definitely see a role for the police in that,” he said.

“I’m probably about 99 per cent successful in my bail applications, and the reason I’m successful is that I sometimes put in conditions that even the judge would not. I’m into curfews at 6 o’clock, I’m into reporting conditions, I’m into getting immediate counselling if required.”

Mr. Betty added that in his midtown neighbourhood of 13 Division, police-community relations have undergone a transformation over the past two years as officers reach out to schools and businesses.

“Knock on wood, I really think it’s a direct response to the kind of pro-active policing that’s been taking place,” he said. “We have to build those relationships and you’ll see the change over the next few years.”